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ABSTRACT

A study was undertaken to examine the influence of in- and out-of-class experiences on the learning and retention of diverse first-year community college students, examining three critical dynamics of the first-year college experience: the transition to college, student involvement and connections on campus, and the view students form of themselves as learners. Focus group interviews were conducted with 77 White, African-American, Latino, and Asian students attending four community colleges in different states. Students chosen were full-time students completing their first semester in college and were interviewed in groups of 4-6 using a 13 question, open-ended interview protocol. Partial findings were examined for 30 Latino students at two of the community colleges and analyzed with respect to student involvement theory and the four elements of the Bicultural Socialization Model: socialization, identity, cultural forces, and institutional dimensions. Findings for these students included the following: (1) the students had high aspirations, self-initiative, and resilience; (2) obstacles encountered prior to enrollment included low expectations, teachers stereotyping of students, over-socializing in high school, and resistance to academic practices; (3) in terms of making the transition to college, positive aspects were learning interesting and relevant material and meeting new people/making friends, while negative elements were the effect of college on family relations and pre-college friendships; and (4) students who found it difficult to get involved experienced culture-shock and had work and family commitments. (KP)

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First-Year Student Experiences in Community Colleges: Crossing Borders, Making Connections and Developing Perceptions About Learning

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Problem

The likelihood that first time college students survive their initial year of college is not encouraging. Statistical data depict the grim story. Over half of all entering students will leave before they complete their first year of college (Tinto, 1993). Their departure reduces the likelihood that they will attain future academic success (Carter & Wilson, 1993; Rendón, 1994; Tinto, 1987, 1993; Upcraft & Gardner, 1989).

The literature on student persistence suggests that the extent to which first-year students experience success in college may be determined by how well these students negotiate two dynamics that are critical to retention:

- How these students make the transition to college.
- How well these students form connections and become academically and socially integrated in campus life.

TABLE 1

Estimated Institutional Rates of First-Year Attrition for All Entering Students (1992 ACT Survey)

Institutional Type	All Entrants
Four-year public	30.0%
Four-year private	25.4
All four-year institutions	28.5
Two-year public	54.2
Two-year private	29.6
All two-year institutions	49.6

Source: American College Testing Program, 1992; as cited in Tinto, V. (1993), Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of in- and out-of-class experiences of diverse community college students on three critical dynamics that encompass the first-year college experience:

- facilitating the successful transition to college;
- promoting student involvement and connections on campus;
- fostering multiple perspectives of how students view themselves as learners.

The purpose of this study attempted to:

- understand the richness and complexities of these dynamics captured from student voices;
- determine the range of these student experiences; and
- provide insights into how students experience and perceive these three phenomena.

Overview

This study was undertaken as part of the In- and Out-of-Class Experiences Project for the National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning and Assessment (NCPTLA). The focus of this project is to assess the influence of first-year community college student experiences, in and out-of-class, on student learning and retention. Dr. Laura Rendón is the principal investigator for the In- and Out-of Experiences Project. Dr. Patrick Terenzini is the Coordinator of the Out-of-Class Experiences Program for NCPTLA.

Research Questions

Student Transitions

1. What in- and out-of-class experiences characterize the transition to college for diverse community college students during the first semester in college?

Student Involvement

2. What in- and out-of-class experiences foster or impede community college students' involvement in institutional life?

Student Perceptions of Their Learning Ability

3. What in- and out-of-class experiences play a role in fostering positive or negative perceptions of student learning?

This presentation is based upon a work in progress and addresses the first two themes regarding student transitions and involvement issues.

Study Sites

This exploratory study employed focus group interviews with 77 students attending four community colleges: Southeastern, West Coast, Southwest and Western (fictitious names).

The four community colleges selected offered variation on both student characteristics (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic class) and institutional traits (e.g., size, curricular emphasis, location).

The four community colleges reside in separate states along the sunbelt portion of the United States.

The findings reported in this presentation are based on interviews with 30 Latino students attending two community colleges: West Coast and Southwest (fictitious names).

West Coast and Southwest community colleges have the following characteristics:

- West Coast is located in a suburb of a large metropolitan city in a large western state.

- Southwest is located in a suburban area of growing city in a large southwestern state near the United States border with Mexico.

Participant Selection

- Institutional contact person was instructed to select participants according to the following criteria:

  1. Mixed gender
  2. Groups of White, African American, Latino and Asian students
  3. Completing their first semester in college
  4. Full-time students

- A random sample was not selected, given that the study did not seek to draw inferences to a larger population. Rather, the intent was to describe the first-year experiences of a select group of students.

- Students were interviewed in groups of 4-6. Groups were limited to a single racial or ethnic background, but were mixed in terms of gender.

- Students were paid $10 for their participation in the focus group interviews.

Table 2

Latino Student Respondents

West Coast & Southwest Community Colleges

n=30

Site	Focus Groups	Male	Female	Student Total
West Coast Community College	3	11	6	17
Southwest Community College	3	6	7	13
Totals	6	17	13	30

Protocol Design

- This study employed a 13 question, open-ended interview protocol. The protocol was broadly structured to contain prompts for information about student backgrounds, their transition to college, the connections they make with institutional life and perceptions of their learning ability.

- The protocol was constructed, in part, from components of two separate interview schedules used in different studies: The Transition to College Project, National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning and Assessment (Terenzini et al., 1994); and The Education for Women's Development Project (Belenky et al., 1986).

- Questions directly relating to the transition to college were borrowed from Terenzini and others' (1994) study on the transition to college for first-year college students.

- Questions directly relating to how students perceive their learning ability came from Belenky and others' (1986) research on the role of education in a woman's life as detailed in *Women's Ways of Knowing.*

Data Collection and Analysis

- Interviews were tape recorded. A moderator and co-moderator lead the discussion. Post meetings between the moderator and co-moderator were held to compare impressions and share researcher notes.
- Interviews yielded over 300 single-spaced pages of data
- Data were analyzed inductively according to a specific interview question.
- Each exemplar was identified and classified with an emphasis on selecting responses that were common between campuses and student characteristics.
- HyperQual (Padilla, 1991) was employed to manipulate data into sorted categories and to report the contents of all thematic files.
- Exemplars were sorted and cataloged into thematic matrices and files (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Padilla, 1994).
- Thematic matrices were used to construct generative patterns and themes. Each theme required creating preliminary categories that were constructed from related and sorted exemplars.
- All themes were arranged according to similarities that were common across campuses and student sub-groups.

The Bicultural Socialization Model

According to de Anda (1984), six factors are in involved in the bicultural socialization process:

- The degree of overlap of commonalty between the two cultures with regard to norms, values, beliefs, perceptions, and the like.
- The availability of culture translators, mediators, and models.
- The amount and type (positive or negative) of corrective feedback provided by each culture regarding attempts to produce normative behavior.
- The conceptual style and problem-solving approach of minority individuals and their mesh with prevalent or valued styles of the majority culture.
- The individual's degree of bilingualism.
- The degree of dissimilarity in physical appearance from the majority culture, such as skin color and facial features.

The Bicultural Socialization Model

According to Zambrana (1988), the central tenets of the bicultural socialization model include four elements: socialization, identity, culture, and institutional dimensions.

Socialization

- Socialization is directly influenced by social factors such as institutional settings
- Schools are an example of a socializing institutional setting.
- Schooling is a powerful determinant in the socialization experiences of Latina women (Zambrana, 1988).
- A substantial number of Latina women in the Zambrana study felt that their elementary and secondary school experiences failed to prepare them for a higher education, and the majority of respondents felt no encouragement to pursue a higher education.

Identity

- Gender, race, class and language facility could be described as personal dimensions which influenced one's identity.
- The ability to identify with the Latino culture denotes certain values, beliefs and traditions which are often associated with this ethnic group.
- Latino identity is a dynamic entity which changed in response to various structural conditions.
- Identity changes are necessary to cope with *cultural assaults*. Cultural assaults are injuries to one's sense of identity and self-esteem and can lead to feelings of marginality, denial of cultural heritage, guilt, stress, tension, and self-hatred.

The Bicultural Socialization Model

Culture

- Culture in a bicultural socialization framework is defined as "a behavioral repertoire which develops as a function of one's historical roots as well as in response to the social conditions under which one lives" (Zambrana, 1988, p. 68).

- Culture helps individuals to better deal with life but doesn't lock one into a particular lifestyle if options and choices are available.

- Culture socializes individuals to think and act in specific and distinct ways to assure survival.

- From a cultural perspective, when values of a particular culture are violated, disregarded, or trivialized, the effect creates an invalidating life experience.

Institutional Dimensions

- Institutional dimensions exist within schools and colleges that are capable of creating exclusionary practices in the areas of curriculum, organizational activities, teacher expectations, tracking and educational counseling.

- Educational theorists and researchers have argued that educational institutions have established psychosocial borders which have been difficult to overcome for many minority and nontraditional students (Bourdieu, 1977; Giroux, 1992; McCarthy, 1990; Tierney, 1991; Valadez, 1993; Weis, 1985, 1992; Zambrana, 1988).

- Educational borders and barriers exist within and outside the classroom, and include racism, classism and sexism. These elements constitute cultural assaults and create damaging psychological effects that marginalize students.

Student Involvement Theory

Student involvement can be viewed as having the following characteristics:

- Involvement is the time, energy and effort students devote to the learning process.
- Highly involved students devote considerable energy to studying, working on-campus, participating actively in student organizations and interacting frequently with faculty members and student peers.
- Involvement is something students do, rather than something that is done for them.
- Getting involved in institutional life is primarily the student's responsibility.

Elements of Involvement Theory:

Involvement theory, as defined by Astin (1985), is comprised of five basic postulates:

- involvement requires students' investment of physical and psychological energy in various "objects;" outside themselves in both generalized (i.e., the student experience) and specific (i.e., preparing for a math exam) ways;

- involvement occurs along a continuum, with a student manifesting different degrees of involvement in different objects at different times;

- involvement can be measured either qualitatively or quantitatively, such as whether students review and comprehend assignments or the number of hours students spend studying;

- the amount of student learning and development is directly proportional to the quantity and quality of student involvement;

- the effectiveness of educational policy and practice is directly related to how these practices increase student involvement.

Findings

Descriptive Profile of Community College Students

I. Personal Characteristics

- High Aspirations
- Self Initiative
- Resilience

II. Obstacles Students Encountered Prior to College Enrollment

- The Inability to Recognize the Value of Education
- Low Expectations Set in High School
- Unmotivated High School Teachers
- Confrontations with School Staff
- Teachers Stereotyping Students
- Being Prohibited from Membership in Academic Peer Groups
- Living in an Environment Removed from Academics
- Over-Socializing in High School
- Living in Closed Inner Worlds
- Resisting Certain Academic Practices

III. Positive Influences

- Positive Family Influences on College Attendance
- Positive Peer Influences on College Attendance

Findings

Transition to College: Crossing Borders

I. The Upside of Attending College

- Learning interesting and relevant material
- Meeting new people, making friends, and joining support groups
- Feeling proud about being the first in their family to attend college
- Entering college after a delay to pursue a career or raise a family
- Encouraging family members and friends to attend college
- Denoting a positive change in one's behavior and self-concept

II. The Downside of Attending College

- The effect of college on family relations
- The effect of college on pre-college friendships

III. A Culture Clash in Living Between Two Worlds

- The Different Worlds Students Live In
  - Family Life
  - Inner Worlds
  - Academic Life
- Dealing with Cultural Assaults
  - Student perceptions of how instructors view students
- Serving as Cultural Mediators and Translators

Findings

Making Connections

I. Students Who Find It Difficult to Get Involved

- Experiencing Culture Shock
- Work Commitments
- Family Commitments

II. Elements that Aid in Making Connections on Campus

- Helpful People
- Helpful Experiences
  - A Slow and Comfortable Pace
  - Meeting Impressive People
- Helpful Institutional Offerings
  - The Puente Project
  - Campus Facilities

III. Elements that Hinder Making Connections on Campus

- Unhelpful People
- Unhelpful Experiences
  - The Fast Pace of College Life
  - Stereotyping in College
  - The Slow Pace & Less Demanding Coursework
  - Adjustment Problems
- Limited Institutional Offerings